DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 417 914 RC 021 468

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TITLE	Voices from Within.
PUB DATE	1998-03-00
NOTE	9p.; In: Coming Together: Preparing for Rural Special Education in the 21st Century. Conference Proceedings of the American Council on Rural Special Education (18th, Charleston, SC, March 25-28, 1998); see RC 021 434.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Administrator Attitudes; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; *Rural Schools; School Attitudes; *School Effectiveness; School Surveys; *Student Attitudes; Student School Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS	Oklahoma

ABSTRACT

This pilot study focuses on the loss of community-like climate as a factor in the quality of rural schools and in perceptions of the effective rural education image. Surveys of 129 school administrators, teachers, and students from five rural schools in Oklahoma covered 18 factors identified in the literature as affecting school effectiveness. Student perceptions of 14 of the 18 factors were significantly less positive than teacher or administrator perceptions. The narrative and quantitative data suggest that schools do not recognize students' perspectives when constructing or carrying out the school's mission. The students' persistence in perceiving many educational factors as egocentric and emotive, such as success/failure (academic interaction), fairness (student to teacher relations, classroom climate, and classroom instruction), attitude (motivation), and punitive measures (discipline), is indicative of a psychologically insecure environment. Interventions aimed at clarifying classroom methods, increasing the organizational structure of the classroom instruction, increasing teacher affect in relating the material, and developing a cohesive support network for learning are supported by this research. Recommendations related to common goals, discipline, and democratic decision making are included. (SAS)

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ED 417 914

VOICES FROM WITHIN

Introduction

The expansion of metro areas in Oklahoma is changing the climate of the traditional rural school. Rural schools operate under the same state mandates and funding constraints of their larger metro counterparts, but the education provided by the rural school is qualitatively different. While the rural school has difficulty in offering as wide a variety and quality of electives as their larger counterparts, they are able to offer a community-like setting within the school. Students from small schools (less than 500 students per building) have been shown to outperform students in large schools on basic skills (Raywid, 1998).

Research has indicated that size of the school is the most important controllable factor in student achievement (Lee & Smith, 1994). Raywid (1998) synthesized the research on small school success and found that success is attributable to three factors: size, organizational structure, and a community-like setting. The organizational structure and the communication in a community-like setting allows students, teachers, administrators, and parents to work towards common goals more effectively.

Rural schools that were once more like the small school environment studied by Lee and Smith (1994) now find themselves torn between holding onto the small school climate and dealing with the urban school type problems. The issue becomes a matter of establishing, interpreting, and implementing school policy that addresses the needs as well as the concerns of the changing population. Influences from the community weigh heavily on the rural school system and make sorting out the real issues and feasible solutions more difficult. The collaborative climate disintegrates as the decision making process becomes more faction driven. Rural schools that once held the broad support of the community have now become the scapegoat for many societal issues.

Raywid's (1998) conceptualization of the community-like setting focused on the inter-relationships between students, teachers, and administrators within the community at large as well as the school's community. An implication of the community-like setting was that teachers and administrators took more ownership of individual students and followed their progression throughout their academic career. But with the increased mobility of the teaching force and limited services available in rural Oklahoma, many teachers are compelled to reside outside the school district. Additional factors in the exodus of faculty from the resident school community include a desire for anonymity, avoidance of assaults from the status-quo sector, and separation of social and professional lives.

The loss of the community-like climate has had dramatic effects on the quality of schooling that was found in rural schools in years past. The media has played an important role in promoting the effective, rural education image through coverage of standardized test rankings, community supported athletic programs, and low teacher to student ratios. The myth or fact of this perception is the subject of this pilot study.

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Eighteen of the effective school factors defined by Wang and her associates (1994) were clustered into five broad categories. These categories were student aptitude, classroom instruction and climate, context, program design, and school organization. The design of the study required administrators, teachers, and students within a rural school system to assess each of these influential categories as they applied to learning within their school system. The degree of consensus within a school's administrator, teacher, and student populations are hypothesized to represent the organizational structure and community-like setting of effective small schools.

Recent publications have suggested that the perceptions of what is really happening in schools varies greatly. School administrators' and students' perceptions of the drug free status of their school varied by some 37% (Portner, 1997). Johnston and Nicholls (1995) found that in 26 of 28 participating schools the consensus of a democratic decision-making process was the leading factor in effective school operation. These studies are indicative of the importance of effective communication between all populations of the school structure.

Methodology

Subjects

The population was drawn from 5 rural schools in Oklahoma. The school systems were drawn at random from a pool of rural districts within a three county area of central Oklahoma. The participating districts had a mean student body population of 1,563, with a range from 798 to 1,986 students. Three sub-populations within the participating districts were surveyed. The first group consisted of school administrators which was defined for this research as central office administrators and building principals. Teachers made up the second survey group and students the third. Data were collected equally from all three sub-populations within each school system.

The total sample population of 126 consisted of 33 administrators, 39 teachers, and 54 students. The administrative population was 79% male while the teaching population was 86% female. The student population also showed a female dominance but was more gender balanced at a 52% to 48% ratio.

Instrument

The survey instrument content was drawn from a review of the literature on effective schools. Items were composed to represent 18 factors identified as common in effective schools (WangHaertel, & Walberg, 1994). Two item types were composed for each factor. The first was open ended, providing for a short narrative response. The second item type was placed on a 5 pointLikert-like scale. The 18 factors were presented twice in the Likert-like item format: one positively phrased and one negatively phrased. To reduce the effect of content redundancy, one of the twoLikert-like items for each factor was placed on a five point response set in a grading (A-F) format, while the other item set consisted of a 5 point "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" format. All of the open-ended responses were collected and then theLikert-like items were collected.

Since the same form of the instrument was used with students and adult school personnel, the reading level was limited to a seventh grade level. A research fellow was present at the time of administration to answer questions and clarify item content. Administration time was not limited but ranged from 20 to 45 minutes.

Analysis

The matching attribute items from the two Likert-like data sets were subjected to confirmatory T-tests after transposing the scoring of the negatively phrased items. The results of 17 of the 18 T-tests indicated no significant difference between the A-F and the 1-5 phrased items. One data set A-F grading format was allowed to represent 17 of the content areas in a one (item)-by-three (administrators, teachers, students) analysis of variance. The open-ended responses for each of the 18 factors areas were used to clarify the perceptions of the subjects following the Tukey post-hoc analysis of the significant ANOVA items.

A qualitative analysis of the open ended responses was conducted using the Scolari NUD-IST program for personal computers. The item by item responses were grouped into administrators, teachers, and students for analysis. The factor tree for each item was then merged with the qualitative analysis of the Likert-like items to better understand the perceptions of each response group.

Results

The T-test results indicated that the two items that addressed the "valued as a person" factor differed significantly (.03). In a post-hoc analysis it was discovered that the subjects interpreted the A-F Likert-like item to represent school/job and responded in terms of how valued they were in the school setting. The 1-5 response format item elicited a broader life framed response.

The analysis of variance results for each factor are presented in Table 1. Significant differences were found within the three response groups on 14 of the 18 factors. The curriculum design, classroom methods, discipline, and special curriculum content factors were nonsignificant. The trend was for administrators to rate the factors as superior, with teacher ratings second, above average to superior, and student ratings lowest at average to slightly above average.

The first factor, classroom management, was rated above average by both the administrators (mean = 1.76) and teachers (mean = 1.91), but only average (mean = 3.38) by the students. The open-ended response items from the administrators and teachers indicated that management was a major part of their daily activity while, students indicated that they spent a lot of time waiting on the teacher. The issue seemed to be a difference between structure (rules, seating, grades, etc.) and organization (materials, lesson, etc.). The teachers and administrators focused on the structure side of classroom management while the students were more concerned with the organizational side.

The cognitive process factor was rated above average (mean = 1.88) by administrators but as only average (mean = 3.04) by students. The administrators' narrative responses were focusing on how their respective districts did in meeting "standards" while the students' responses were more related to specific skill acquisition.

Parental support was rated above average and average (mean = 2.11 & 2.56) respectively by administrators and teachers while students rated parental support as low average (mean = 3.15). The administrators' narrative responses focused on global support which included issues such as "turnout at school functions" and "voter support." Student responses were focused more on egocentric, daily issues such as "help with homework" and "purchasing school supplies."

Table 1
ANOVA Results by Attribute

Factor	Admin.	Teacher	Student	F	p
1. Classroom Mgt.	1.765	1.909	3.385	14.514	>.000*
2. Cognitive Processes	1.882	1.727	3.040	12.705	>.000*
3. Parental Support	2.117	2.556	3.154	5.600	.006*
4. Student/Tch. Relations	2.235	2.556	3.231	5.752	.005*
5. Behavioral Attributes	1.235	1.636	2.846	13.702	>.000*
6. Motivation					
Students	2.117	2.272	3.440	9.111	>.000*
Faculty	1.941	2.545	3.307	8.748	>.000*
7. Peers	1.941	2.300	3.039	6.078	.004*
8. Quantity of Inst.	1.353	1.330	3.539	39.924	>.000*
9. School Culture	1.765	1.909	3.154	11.954	>.000*
10. Classroom Climate	2.000	2.400	3.192	7.657	.001*
11. Classroom Instruction	1.824	1.634	2.769	7.623	.001*
12. Curriculum Design	3.429	3.500	3.368	2.026	.143
13. Academic Interactions	1.471	1.727	3.115	15.653	>.000*
14. Grades as Assessment	1.880	2.330	2.810	3.212	.049
15. Classroom Methods	2.571	2.110	2.806	2.020	.140
16. Admin. Decisions	1.471	2.111	3.240	14.728	>.000*
17. Discipline	2.650	2.200	2.812	2.363	.104
18. Special Curriculum					
Drug Ed.	2.285	3.222	3.625	2.286	.113
Sex Ed.	2.000	1.750	2.538	2.933	.063

Based on a 1-5 (A-F) scale with 1 being superior and 5 being failing. N=124

The fourth factor queried dealt with the student-to-teacher relationship. Administrators ranked their teacher's relationship with their students as above average (mean = 2.24). Their narrative responses indicated administrators defined a "show of respect" as the major indicator of the students' relationship with their school. The students (mean = 3.23) low average rating was clarified in their narrative responses as being based on "fairness, consistency" and "attitude" related issues. Several responses from both the teachers and students indicated the student-to-teacher relationship were perceived as adversarial in nature.

The behavioral attributes factor was comprised of social behaviors, positive and negative nondisruptive actions, and disruptive behaviors that occur within the school environment. The administrators rated this factor superior (mean = 1.24) while teacher ratings were at the high end of the above average range (mean = 1.64). Students rated the behavioral attributes within the average range (mean = 2.85). The administrators' and teachers' responses significantly differed from the students' ratings. The narrative analysis failed to clearly define the traits that discriminated the two groups. The indication from some responses confirms that much of the behavioral activity that occurs at school, positive as well as negative, goes unnoticed.

Table 2
Tukey-HSD Significant Differences

Factor	Significant Differences Between Groups at .05 or Higher	
1. Classroom Mgt.	Administrators & Teachers	Students
2. Cognitive Processes	Administrators & Teachers	Students
3. Parental Support	Administrators	Students
4. Student/Tch. Relations	Administrators	Students
5. Behavioral Attributes	Administrators & Teachers	Students
6. Motivation		
Students	Administrators & Teachers	Students
Faculty	Administrators	Students
7. Peers	Administrators	Students
8. Quantity of Inst.	Administrators & Teachers	Students
9. School Culture	Administrators & Teachers	Students
10. Classroom Climate	Administrators	Students
11. Classroom Instruction	Administrators & Teachers	Students
12. Curriculum Design	No Significant Differences	
13. Academic Interactions	Administrators & Teachers	Students
14. Grades as Assessment	Administrators	Students
15. Classroom Methods	No Significant Differences	
16. Admin. Decisions	Administrators & Teachers	Students
17. Discipline	No Significant Differences	
18. Special Curriculum		
Drug Ed.	No Significant Differences	
Sex Ed.	No Significant Differences	

The motivation factor was split into two perceptions. The first was a rating of the students' motivation by all three groups. Administrators and teachers rated student motivation as above average (mean = 2.17 and 2.27 respectively) while students said they were below average (mean = 3.44) in motivation. Motivation of the faculty was the second component of this factor. Administrators (mean = 1.94) rated themselves as above average in motivation and from the narrative responses their "time spent working" provided the basis for this assessment. Teachers rated themselves on the high end of average (mean = 2.55), which is lower than they rated the students' motivation (mean 2.27). The students rated the faculty's motivation as average (mean = 3.03) and only slightly higher than their own. The faculty responses, in general, defined motivation in terms of "dedication" to their job, while students were more inclined to view a teacher motivation in terms of the teacher's "attitude" and "the way" the teacher taught. The teachers followed the performance theme of defining student motivation in terms of "grades" and "participation" in school activities or organizations.

The peers factor focused on the academic aspirations, history, conformity, etc. of peers. The administrators responded with an above average rating (mean = 1.94) and suggested through the narrative analysis that students rose to the peer level that equaled their own abilities and aspirations. Students rated this factor as average (mean = 3.04) and also suggested that they naturally selected their own peer groups, but the selection criteria was broader than just abilities and academic aspirations. Students included "activities" that they enjoyed participating in as the most frequent reason for forming or joining a peer group, followed by social reasons, and then abilities.

Quality of instruction was rated near superior (mean = 1.35 and 1.33) by the administrators and teachers respectively while, students rated quality of instruction as below average (mean = 3.54). The administrators and teachers focused on "standards, test scores, and rigor" while the students were more inclined to view quality as "teacher's attitude, fairness, classroom organization, and activity level." This is next to the lowest rating the students gave any factor.

The school culture factor was concerned with the school wide emphasis on and recognition of academic success and was rated above average by the administrators (mean = 1.76) as well as teachers (mean = 1.9). Students rated this as low average (mean = 3.15). The significant differences between administrators/ teachers and students seemed to be based on frequency or the recognition within a given time frame. Teachers and administrators responded with information about awards, scholarships, etc. that are given on a biannual or annual basis. Students were more inclined to view the academic emphasis of school culture in light of daily issues of "assignments, classroom emphasis, daily grades," etc.

The classroom climate factor related to the cohesiveness of class members in sharing common interests, values, and goals. Administrators ranked climate as above average (mean = 2.0) while students (mean = 3.19) indicated that there was more strife in the classroom. The administrators indicated that "classroom structure, teaching skills, and compliance" attributes were important in establishing a cohesive classroom climate. Students were more focused on "fairness, rules, cliques, and respect by the teacher" as determining attributes of a cohesive classroom.

The attributes of instruction related to clearness and organization of classroom instruction. Again the administrators (mean = 1.82) and teachers (mean =1.63) significantly differed from the students (mean = 2.78). Administrators and teachers focused more on "structure, order, and standards" attributes. Students viewed classroom climate in terms of "fairness, rules, and success" attributes. This is one of the three significant factors where the teachers' ratings were higher than the administrators.

The curriculum design factor emphasized content, sequence, instructional tools, and alignment among goals and assessment. This factor was not significant between the response groups, but it is significant in that the administrators (mean = 3.43) and teachers (mean = 3.5) are both low average ratings. These low average rating are the only instance in the data set where the student ratings (mean = 3.36) were above the other two groups. This indicates that from all three perceptions the curriculum being designed and implemented in the schools is recognized as being disjointed.

The academic interaction factor concentrated on the student-to-student and student-to-teacher interactions concerning the content being taught. Classroom practices such as questioning strategies and small group activities fall within this factor's domain. The administrators (mean = 1.47) and teachers (mean = 1.72) were in the superior and above average ranges respectively, while the students (mean = 3.11) perceived these interactions as average to below average. The administrators focused on "program development," while teachers focused on classroom "practices and teaching styles." Students saw it as a much simpler issue of being "successful or failing, encouraged or discouraged, embarrassed," etc. within the classroom domain.

The assessment factor was rated significantly different by administrators (mean = 1.88) and students (mean = 2.81). The administrators indicated that formal assessment tools such as grades and test scores were valuable and a good indicator of school success. Students generally felt that tests and grades did not truly reflect what they really had learned. Students were grade conscious and valued grades for how it made them feel and how grades influenced other people's views of them as a person.

The classroom methods factor ranked the prevalence of establishing efficient classroom routines, rules, and procedures. Teachers (mean = 2.11) ranked these attributes at the average level while the administrators (mean = 2.57) ranked them at the lower average level. The students (mean = 2.8) rated this factor the lowest but not significantly different than the administrators or teachers. The differences in the narratives stemmed from knowledge of the "mission." Teachers and administrators have a method to their classroom expectations, but this method is not always communicated in direct forms to the students.

The administrative decision factor addressed how the system wide and building wide decisions are made and the degree of involvement of students, teachers, parents, and community in the decision process. The administrators rated the involvement of others in the decision making process as superior (mean = 1.47) while teachers (mean = 2.11) rated involvement as above average. The teachers' narratives indicated that they felt many of the policies mandated at the state and district level were not in their students best interest. One teacher noted it as, "The tracking and paperwork management system that is being required by my district interferes with my classroom effectiveness..." The students (mean = 3.24) were divided on this issue. Some felt that the decisions of the administration were in their best interest and aimed at protecting them physically and educationally while, others perceived the administrative decisions as constricting.

The discipline factor was not significantly different between the three groups. The administrators (mean = 2.65), teachers (mean = 2.2), and students (mean = 2.8) all rated discipline in the average to above average range. The narrative items revealed that all three groups also agreed in associating discipline as a negative, punitive actions.

The last factor, specialized curriculum areas, was not significantly different between the three groups. The teachers (mean = 1.75) rated the quality of their sex education programs as above average. However, they felt they were marginally trained to teach a drug education (mean = 3.22) curriculum. Students also rated quality of the sex education curriculum higher (mean 2.54) than the drug education (mean = 3.36) curriculum.

Conclusions

Several issues are brought up by this study. The major players in the game of education seem to each have their own agenda. The curriculum, instruction, and even learning are perceived differently by the three most important groups in the education setting. Coming to terms with and establishing an effective two-way line of communication within the school is important to the over-all school climate. Schools have become the whipping post for a lot of societal problems. A major step towards deflating the adversarial relationship that has developed over the past two decades is establishing effective communication and re-establishing pride in the school climate. Pride in one's school and community support of the school needs to become a priority of rural schools.

The narrative and quantitative data suggest that schools do not approach or recognize the student's perspective in constructing or carrying out the school's mission. Many students indicated that because their work, learning, as well as their personal and social self is not respected or valued they have withdrawn from fully engaging in school activities. The negative affective treatment they receive from the school environment is often erroneously projected onto the content (reading, math, etc.). While students have a passion for learning they do not always have a passion for schooling.

The students persistence in perceiving many of the educational factors as egocentric and emotive, such as success/failure (academic interaction), fairness (student to teacher relations, classroom climate, and classroom instruction), attitude (motivation), and punitive measures (discipline), is indicative of an environment that is not psychologically secure. Interventions aimed at clarifying classroom methods, increasing the organizational structure of the classroom instruction, increasing teacher affect in relating the material, and developing a cohesive support network for learning are supported by this research. This supports Brooks (1985) observation that students want to know, "Who their teachers are as people?" and "Will the teacher treat them as a human being?" The importance of the student-to-teacher relationship has far reaching implications. When students and teachers combine individual strengths (positive attitudes, organizational skills, and respect) through open communication a synergistic effect on academic success will result.

Recommendations

1. The common goals of education are must be formulated and communicated effectively between the administrators, teachers, and students.

2. Discipline, which is viewed as a punitive and negative issue by the administrators, teachers, and students needs clarification. People will rise to the expectations that are given them. It is appears that our current expectations of discipline are negative. These expectations must be reformed to promote responsive and positive choices from all parties.

3. Schools need to emulate a democratic society in the decision making process. Students perceptions are equally important to that of teachers and administrators since they are the constituency that schools are designed to serve.

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